

RAND Research Brief

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A New U.S. Strategy for a Changing Asia

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Under an umbrella of U.S. security guarantees, the past 20 years have been a time of relative peace in Asia and, the 1997–1998 financial crisis notwithstanding, a period of robust economic growth. Currently, however, Asia faces a host of pressures that may well imperil the stability it has recently enjoyed. Asia's very economic success, for example, may ultimately act to its detriment by fueling latent rivalries and ambitions that were once subordinated to economic growth. As a result, long-standing territorial disputes, nuclear rivalries, and nationalist sentiments may come to the fore, thereby disrupting the region's fragile political-military balance.

A new RAND study, *The United States and Asia: Toward a New U.S. Strategy and Force Structure*, proposes an approach that the United States can take to help preserve stability in Asia in the face of the region's changing security environment. After examining major regional trends and the challenges they pose, the report outlines ways in which the United States might respond to and shape future Asian developments toward the goal of creating a "dynamic peace." The study then examines the long-term implications of this approach for U.S. military forces in general and the U.S. Air Force in particular.

NEW REGIONAL CHALLENGES

To help ensure Asia's peace and stability, the United States must successfully manage a number of critical regional challenges. In Northeast Asia, for example, improved relations between North and South Korea may culminate in Korean unification or reconciliation, but the resolution of the Korean problem may dramatically alter existing security arrangements and profoundly affect current U.S. force posture. Another key development is China's growing economic, technological, and military prowess. The near-term question for U.S. planners is how best to respond to the threat of Chinese aggression against Taiwan. For the long term, however, the United States

must consider the strategic and military challenges China will pose should it seek to diminish U.S. influence in the region or aggressively pursue regional primacy.

India, too, has begun to assume a larger role in regional political-military affairs, and its aspirations to great-power status may become a source of deepening conflict with China. In the interim, India is involved in an ongoing dispute with Pakistan over Kashmir, where incursions, insurgency, and terrorism—coupled with nuclear weapon capabilities on both sides—make for a potentially explosive mix. In Southeast Asia, the fall of the Suharto regime in Indonesia has led to separatist movements and civil strife that may undermine the country's territorial integrity. Japan and Russia aspire to enhanced political and military status that could similarly destabilize the current regional order.

COMPONENTS OF A U.S. STRATEGY FOR THE FUTURE

To meet such potential challenges, the United States must begin to develop an integrated political, military, and economic strategy aimed at thwarting the growth of rivalries that may engender instability or conflict in the region. Central to this objective is the need to prevent the rise of a dominant power that might seek to undermine the U.S. role in Asia or use force to assert its claims. Of equal importance, however, is the need to maintain stability in the region and to help manage Asia's peaceful development while increasing economic access to the area as a whole.

In the service of these goals, the United States should undertake a four-part strategy:

- Complement its bilateral security alliances to create a broader security framework. This multilateralization could ultimately include Japan, South Korea, Australia, and perhaps Singapore, the Philippines, and Thailand.

- Pursue a balance-of-power strategy among key Asian states that are not part of the U.S. alliance structure, including China, India, and Russia.
- Discourage the use of force as a means of settling territorial disputes.
- Promote an inclusive security dialogue among all the states of Asia as a means of discussing regional conflicts, building confidence, and encouraging states to enter into a multilateral framework in the future.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. MILITARY

Implementing such a wide-ranging strategy in Asia will require major adjustments to current U.S. military posture. In particular, the focus of U.S. attention will have to shift from Northeast Asia, which is already well served by the existing U.S. base structure, to other subregions throughout the continent. Although existing security arrangements in Northeast Asia should by no means be abandoned, greater attention will have to be paid to Taiwan, where basing is politically and militarily problematic, and to Southeast Asia, where a permanent U.S. combat presence is currently lacking. Toward this goal, efforts must be made to assess the feasibility of establishing forward operating locations in Japan to support Taiwan in the event of a conflict with mainland China. Similarly, the United States should seek to solidify existing access arrangements and cement new ones with the Philippines, Indonesia, and possibly Vietnam to prepare for potential military contingencies in Southeast Asia.

Finally, the United States must heed the special challenges South Asia presents. Critical in itself by virtue of the long-standing rivalry between India and Pakistan and the growing nuclear capabilities of each, South Asia is also a vital link between Asia proper and the Middle East and Central Asia. Yet U.S. military forces currently lack reliable access to the subcontinent. Expanding military-to-military relations with former Soviet republics and other Central Asian states could provide valuable access to airspace and facilities in the event that U.S. military resources are needed in this volatile region.

The overall U.S. posture in the Western Pacific would benefit from three additional steps. First, Guam should be built up as a major hub for power projection throughout Asia. Second, the U.S. Air Force and Navy should work at developing new concepts of operations that would maximize the leverage of their combined forces in a future Pacific crisis. Third, the Air Force should continue to review its future force structure to see if it might benefit from a greater emphasis on longer-range combat platforms.

The United States cannot hope to resolve every regional security issue in Asia, but it can continue to deter aggression and promote peaceful development. To do so effectively, however, it must adopt a comprehensive strategy aimed at preserving U.S. influence in the face of trends that may dramatically alter the region's geopolitical environment.

RAND research briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. This research brief describes work done for RAND's Project AIR FORCE; it is documented in The United States and Asia: Toward a New U.S. Strategy and Force Posture, by Zalmay Khalilzad, David T. Orletsky, Jonathan D. Pollack, Kevin Pollpeter, Angel Rabasa, David A. Shlapak, Abram N. Shulsky, and Ashley J. Tellis, MR-1315-AF, 2001, 275 pp., ISBN 0-8330-2955-X, available from RAND Distribution Services (Telephone: 310-451-7002; toll free 877-584-8642; FAX: 310-451-6915; or E-mail: order@rand.org). Abstracts of all RAND documents may be viewed on the World Wide Web (<http://www.rand.org>). Publications are distributed to the trade by NBN. RAND® is a registered trademark. RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis; its publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.

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